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Senator Dianne Feinstein

of California

HOUSE AND SENATE APPROPRIATORS OK \$225 MILLION TO PREVENT MUDSLIDES, FIGHT BARK BEETLE AND PROVIDE DISASTER RELIEF IN WAKE OF CALIFORNIA FIRES

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – A House and Senate conference committee Tuesday approved \$225 million secured by Congressman Jerry Lewis and Sen. Dianne Feinstein to prevent mudslides, eliminate a million bark-beetle-killed trees, and provide relief for farmers whose crops were burned in the historic fires that swept Southern California last month.

The funding measures were approved as part of the \$330 billion omnibus spending bill currently being considered by House and Senate Appropriations Committee members to fund virtually all federal agencies outside of the Pentagon. The bill is expected to be approved by the House by the first week in December. Lewis and Feinstein were both members of the conference committee that approved the funding.

“We have an on-going crisis in California that could ultimately make the fires that burned 3,000 homes look small by comparison – a million dead trees still waiting to burn, and thousands of acres of scorched soil that could come crashing down on whole neighborhoods,” said Congressman Lewis, the senior California member of the House Appropriations Committee. “I requested this funding to help us begin to get control of this possible disaster before it happens, and I want to thank Sen. Feinstein for her strong support in convincing the Congress to make this investment.”

With the support of Sen. Feinstein, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Lewis secured \$150 million for the Emergency Watershed Protection program of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, with language that allows the money to be used for both erosion control and to remove dead trees in and around the national forests in Southern California. An additional \$50 million was approved for the U.S. Forest Service tree removal programs on federal land and private property.

“Let me thank Representative Lewis for his great leadership in securing \$200 million in funding to remove trees killed by the Bark Beetle,” Feinstein said. “As we saw last month, these trees become kindling in a serious fire, and put homes and lives at risk. Removing them is a necessary first step toward preventing fires like the ones we experienced from happening again.”

Feinstein also obtained \$25 million with Lewis’s support to help California farmers recover from last months

devastating wildfires. The fires caused tremendous damage to tree crops and livestock ranches. That funding will be distributed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture under crop disaster recovery programs.

“These fires caused a great deal of harm to many in the agricultural community, destroying crops, scorching soil, and killing livestock,” Senator Feinstein said. “This funding won’t pay for all the damage, but it will help thousands of farmers in California restore their lives and rebuild their farms.”

The fires that burned in California during late October and early November were among the most expensive disasters ever to hit the state. Insurance payouts alone are expected to cost more than \$3 billion, with public expenditures to fight the fires and recover from them estimated to run into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Lewis and Feinstein were able earlier this month to attach \$500 million in disaster relief funds to a supplemental appropriations bill. That funding ensures that the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which controls disaster relief for individuals and communities, will have enough to pay the claims arising out of the fires. As of this week, FEMA and the Small Business Administration had authorized \$58 million in disaster relief payments to fire victims.

However, FEMA officials have informed Congress that they are currently not empowered to pay for erosion control, crop damage or to remove trees from private land, even if they are deemed to be an imminent fire danger. The current legislation sponsored by Lewis and Feinstein transfers a portion of the earlier \$500 million to the other agencies to ensure that the mitigation measures receive immediate funding. The transfer language has no effect on FEMA’s responsibility to cover disaster claims arising out of the California fires.

The fire-related provisions approved to be part of the omnibus spending bill include:

- \$150 million for the Emergency Watershed Protection program operated by the Natural Resources Conservation District. The legislation also provides authority for the NRCS to include removal of trees killed by the drought and bark beetle as part of a watershed protection program. Without these measures, neighborhoods are in imminent danger of mudslides in San Bernardino, San Diego, Riverside and Ventura counties. In addition, water quality could be degraded for the entire Santa Ana River basin, which serves 5 million people.

- \$50 million to expand a program being developed by the Forest Service to remove dead and dying trees from federal lands and from private land surrounding the national forests. Lewis and Feinstein secured \$40 million earlier this year to ensure that the Forest Service could begin the process of eliminating the fire threat caused by these trees. Estimates range to more than \$300 million to deal with the bark beetle problem in the San Bernardino National Forest alone.

- Language amending the Robert T. Stafford Act to require FEMA to consider hazard mitigation grants for removal of dead and dying trees that pose an extreme danger to public safety.

- \$25 million to the Agriculture Department, including \$12.5 million to replace tree crops and other crops lost to the fires; \$12 million for farmers to avoid soil erosion and other environmental damage; and \$500,000 to help ranchers purchase livestock to replace those destroyed by the fires. This also authorizes the funding to be provided in the case of an arson-caused fire, and makes the funding available as a direct payment rather than a reimbursement.

The omnibus appropriations bill will be the final spending bill approved for the 2004 Fiscal Year. The approved funding will be available as soon as the bill is signed by the President.

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